

## DOUGLAS LAKE MEMORIAL SWIM

Roughly 90 years ago, the campers at the Northwoods Camp for Girls began what would become an annual tradition. Each summer during a period in the mid-1920s, the girls at the camp would swim from the Camp across the lake to the dock in front of the Mercke cottage, located on Bentley Point. Stuart Case's mother, Eleanor Bowen Case, who had been one of the participants, later talked about her experiences with one or more members of the Waggener family. This summer Karin Waggener Admiraal decided to recreate that event using a friend and several family members, making their way from the southern tip of Pells Island to the same Mercke dock that their predecessors had targeted so many years before.

Eleanor Case's son Stuart recalls having also heard about those long-ago swims:

“My mother, Eleanor Bowen Case, worked at the girls' camp at Douglas Lake during the summers of 1924 through 1927, and, possibly, during the summer of 1928. She was 14 years in 1924. Her father, Wilbur Bowen, died in 1928, so I am not sure she would have worked at the camp that summer. She also started college that year. She told me that at least once each summer she was at the camp, she and the other girls would swim from the camp property to Mercke's cottage on the point. The Merckes would give them hot chocolate and a snack upon arrival. The girls would row home in the boats that accompanied them on the swim.”

The following account describes Karin's experience when re-creating this historic swim.

\*\*\*\*\*

### THE LAKE SWIM by Karin Waggener Admiraal

Possibly one of the worst sensations I have ever sensed is the sensation of pulling on a wet bathing suit. The sensation is worse if it has to happen right after one rolls out of a warm bed. It is possibly worst of all if the reason for the wet-bathing-suit-in-the-morning sensation is that one is preparing for a swim in a cold lake. The length and temperature of the swim are, of course, a matter of perception. I am no Lynne Cox, swimming the 30-plus miles across the English Channel or the 43-degree waters of the Bering Strait. For your average 43-year-old mom, however, what I was planning seemed like more than enough.

The official Douglas Lake Swim is about 2.3 miles, across the narrowest part of the lake from Case's Point in the



South to the big white house on the North side of the lake.

This is the official swim because in days gone by, [the southern shore of the Douglas Lake] housed a camp, and the campers would swim over to the big white house for pancakes. I have recently begun wondering how they

returned to camp, but that's not really germane here. The official swim can also be done from North to South, depending on the wind, but from that direction, it lacks the cache of historical precedent.

I had done the swim twice before, both more than 20 years ago in my pre-married, pre-mom days. I don't remember the swims in detail, but I do remember that it seemed like a huge accomplishment and required a good deal of buildup. I practiced swimming a mile in the lake each day, I did core workouts, I "bulked up" by eating extra calories the day before the planned swim. This time, the swim came as a bit of a surprise. I think it started with the arrival of my cousin Brad, who had been with me on my second lake swim and then completed one of his own with my sister, Cate, a few years later. My son Drew is an excellent swimmer, so he decided that, since we had a quorum of previous swimmers on the island (Cate was there, too), we needed to repeat the swim, with him there to beat all of our times and set the lake swim speed record. The last part wasn't going to be difficult, as none of us remembered how long the swim had taken us. I guessed a couple of hours, taking into account the waves, the natural swimmer drift off course, and stops for snacks. Brad guessed 45 minutes, taking into account the fact that when he had last done the swim, he had been a competitive swimmer and could have done it in that time.

I was not as enchanted with the idea as Drew was. In fact, none of the previous members of the Pells Island Swim Team were really up for the feat. Cate bowed out immediately, and then went for a run to prove that physical fitness wasn't the issue. Brad said he'd think about it. I, in the name of supportive motherhood, said I was in, but only if the day wasn't windy. Johanna said she would try, but after swimming to the point of the island with her, I vetoed her participation. She has the worst internal compass I have ever seen; I was trying to swim next to her to keep her headed in the right direction, and she ran into me about 17 times. I had visions of her veering east and ending up at the University of Michigan Biological Station in South Fishtail Bay. Her running fitness is no help, either, because it has made her a compact package of muscle that's apt to sink to the bottom like a stone. So in the end, the boat held me, Drew, Brad (who had slept well and figured 'why not?'), and our 17-year-old French exchange student, who didn't expect to complete the swim, but thought it would be fun to join us for the beginning. My dad [Joe Waggener] was the driver. I threw some water bottles and snacks in the boat, unsure whether we'd need some sustenance on the way. The lake was calm, and the day was as warm as it had been all week, though not as sunny as we might have wished. When we jumped in at Case's Point, the water set my teeth on edge. Record snowfalls and a late spring meant that the lake was cooler than normal. We adjusted our goggles, dunked under the water, and set off. The time was 10:02 a.m.

Brad offered to swim "cleanup" for the first 15 minutes, keeping an eye on the other swimmers to make sure we were all still afloat. My dad putted off in the boat, leading us on what we hoped was a straight course for the opposite shore. After the first 15 minutes, our French friend decided that he had had enough fun for the day and joined my dad in the boat. Drew switched to cleanup duty.



Eric [Karin's husband] and my mom [Ruth Waggener] joined us in the big green boat, armed with cameras to document the event and more towels in case any

hypothermic swimmers needed to exit the lake and warm up. After my cleanup turn, we decided that with two boats, we could just all look out for ourselves. Brad is an ex-competitive swimmer and lifeguard. Drew is a current lifeguard and I – though I failed my high school lifesaving class – am in pretty good shape for an old person.

It was at this point, about halfway across the lake, that I started to feel really happy. Water, especially lake water, has always been my most natural element. It feels safe and comfortable, like a benediction. I lined myself up with the boat and settled into a steady crawl. I run for exercise much more than I swim. I like to be a runner. I like the feeling of having run. But swimming, I love. In a lake, with no lane dividers, no walls, no chlorine, I felt like I could swim forever. Of course, the disadvantage of a lake is that it's a little harder to tell where you are going. I found myself wishing that there was a way to maintain the natural beauty of the lake while still painting lane lines on the bottom. Glowing ones that I could see through all the murk and seaweed. Failing that, I had to switch to breast stroke every few minutes to make sure that I was still headed toward the white house.

It was also about at this point that our swim team started to spread out. Drew, with the fitness of a 17-year-old, pulled ahead. I called to him to wait for us, but he was deep into the zone. Eric and my mom went with him in the green boat. Brad decided that he wanted to float for a while and enjoy the scenery. My dad said he'd stay with him. I took off after Drew and the green boat but couldn't catch them. Drew ended up finishing in around an hour (we weren't sure, since the official timepiece was in the boat with my dad). Given that Brad finished in 1:08, I am awarding myself a time of 1:03. I have no idea if this is any kind of personal record for me, but I will assume – for the sake of my ego – that it is.

What did strike me is that this swim felt much easier than I remember from the previous two times. I wasn't quite ready to turn around and do it the other way, but I didn't want to spend the rest of the day in bed, either. I can't decide whether this is good or bad. On the other hand, maybe it means that that, at 43, I am fitter than I was at 20. That must be a good thing. On the other hand, there is something a little sad about finding that one of my mountains isn't as big as I thought it was. Or maybe the takeaway is that as we grow, so should our goals. Chesapeake Bay anyone?



\*\*\*\*\*

Karin Admiraal has proposed that we Douglas Lakers might want to organize an annual swim across the lake, recreating and memorializing those early swims made by the Northwoods campers nearly 90 years ago.

© 2014 Janet Taylor Huntley

© 2014 Karin Waggener Admiraal